

THE LANGUAGE *with*
DISPLAYED ART (EFACTS)

linguistic and sociological perspectives
on meaning, accessibility and knowledge-building
in museum exhibitions

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'... ism, ism, ism, the words flying around him
like buzzing insects. Why couldn't these fellows
talk normally? wondered Maneck'

– Rohinton Mistry, *A fine balance* (1996: 244)

ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to provide a sensitive, principled and integrated account of the verbal texts in two museum exhibitions: sensitive in terms of being able to show the impact in meaning of even seemingly minor choices made in language; principled in terms of being informed by a rigorous theory of meaning; and integrated in terms of referencing both the process of developing the verbal texts and the range of modalities possible within an exhibition context. In this way, this thesis aims to bring into view the kinds of meanings verbal texts bring to the exhibition experience in the particular context of the role of museums as learning institutions and their mandate to provide inclusive and equitable access to the cultural capital they control.

The study draws on two theoretical frameworks: a theory of meaning, systemic functional semiotics (SFS), and a theory of knowledge, legitimation code theory (LCT). Both have demonstrated track records of providing deep and useful descriptions of language and other semiotics in their social context and, importantly, of their underlying organising principles. It builds on earlier work within the museum field using these frameworks, and on more recent work beyond the museum field in the context of academic literacies. The data comprises team interviews and a range of museum texts.

The thesis makes a number of significant contributions. Through the analysis of team interviews, it brings into view the different disciplinary practices and beliefs concerning knowledge and ways of knowing that were present on the two teams. Analysis of the exhibition texts then shows how these practices and beliefs in turn produced very different kinds of texts, both in terms of what they say (their meaning and learning potentials) and how they position the visitor to interact. In particular this thesis elaborates the intermodal relations between text, displayed artefact and visitor, proposing the idea of verbal vectors as a feature which explicitly scaffolds or 'motivates' visitors to look at the displayed artefact. It also draws on concepts of commonsense and uncommonsense discourse to elaborate notions of linguistic accessibility and to demonstrate the pedagogy at work in museums texts. Significantly too, it contributes to the linguistic description of the discourse of art, to date only rarely described from a systemic functional perspective. This thesis also raises many questions for further research around the meaning-making work of museum texts across the diversity of platforms, voices and technologies in use in museums today, and hopes to stimulate further research into this important area.

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Jennifer Blunden

3 June 2016

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